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Telling the Truth as WPA

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At Al-Anon meetings I learned that alcoholics lie and their families lie, too.²² None of us call it lying, of course: we call it being nice, or avoiding trouble, or keeping the peace. Usually, it's not overt out-and-out lying, but rather minimizing ("It's not that bad"), blaming some other entity ("It's his father's fault"), denial ("She's really very smart, but school doesn't challenge her"), or delusion ("Some day I'll figure out how to please her"). To see the reality of one's life requires working through all these stages to discover which facts have been omitted from the narrative. Only then can one take responsibility for oneself and one's happiness, letting go of responsibility for any other adult's life. No one in Al-Anon or AA would ever say learning this is easy or accomplished overnight.

Serving as a writing program administrator, I've found, requires the same dedication to reality and to telling the truth about that reality—especially if one is to maintain sanity in the midst of English department delusions. It often falls to the Director of Composition to explain to both students and teachers that their own choices have consequences and that different choices are available. But how do you do that? How does a writing program administrator tell the truth?

In this essay, I share what I've learned about truth telling in my experience as an administrator: assistant director of composition for a year in graduate school; associate director when I was an assistant professor; and writing program administrator at three large universities in the south. Of my thirty years in higher education, I've served 15½ as some kind of administrator, eight of those here at Kennesaw State University in Atlanta's northern suburbs. It is ironic that in using my own experience to write about the ethics of telling the truth, professional ethics require me to omit details and disguise others. Truth is more complicated than it appears, as any rhetorician knows.

Being the WPA

Putting out fires is not what the job is about, though some days it surely seems like it. Once, venting about the endless stream of negativity coming into my office, I was gently admonished by my friend Mara Holt, at Ohio University, who said, "When you're the WPA, Beth, every day you have a chance to do something good for somebody." I'd never considered that perspective. When I look for something good to do for the students and teachers I work with, I actually feel better. The first good thing I can do is listen, just listen—not always an easy task for a person like me who talks all the time. The second good thing is showing that I understand: "What I am hearing is that you are angry"; "I can see why this would upset you"; "Oh, my. So tell me what happened then."

Doing something good for students is fairly easy: teaching a first-generation student

²² Al-Anon is an organization for family and friends of alcoholics. Patterned after Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon uses the same Twelve Steps, with only a few words changed as a path to "a spiritual awakening."

how to talk to a college professor, translating a teacher's marginal comments into language a student can understand, sympathizing with a student in trouble. Recently a first-year student came to my office frightened by her English 1101 teacher, who had implied that because she came from a small town, she did not have the background to pass his class, a judgment made on the basis of one initial in-class essay. The student and I talked about study habits and chatted with the Writing Center Director, who set up a series of appointments for her. As this young woman was leaving my office, I stopped her saying, "Just a minute, please. Want to tell you something: I grew up in Thomaston [a small town south of Atlanta], and I have a PhD from one of the finest public universities in America." She smiled, "Thank you for telling me that." That was a good thing. (Dealing with the teacher was a whole 'nother story.) The student made an A.

Similarly, when teachers deplore the attitude or behavior of a student or a class, I listen, ask some questions, and more often than not offer some practical solutions, some of which actually turn out to be theories the teacher may not know. Because many of the teachers I supervise have little formal knowledge of the field of composition and rhetoric, the idea that writing, language, and learning are social opens up a new perspective on what's going on in class, and it makes the pedagogical strategies I suggest make sense. When the problem is classroom management, I can usually offer two or three possible solutions to consider, often prefaced by a sentence like, "Almost the identical thing happened in one my classes the first year I was here" or "Oh, Lord, about twice a year some teacher has to deal with that very same problem." Such comments tell the instructor that the issue is a common one, one that others including me have dealt with successfully. Kenneth Burke is right about the power of identification.

Telling the Truth?

But there are situations that require wrestling with what truth to tell and how much and in what language. In these situations, I turn to Scott Peck's advice about telling the truth in *The Road Less Traveled*. Because I think Peck makes so much pragmatic, ethical, and spiritual sense, I quote what he says exactly:

What rules, then, can one follow if one is dedicated to the truth? First, never speak falsehood. Second, bear in mind that the act of withholding the truth is always potentially a lie, and that in each instance in which the truth is withheld a significant moral decision is required. Third, the decision to withhold truth should never be based on personal needs, such as a need for power, a need to be liked, or a need to protect one's map from challenge. Fourth, and conversely, the decision to withhold truth must always be based entirely upon the needs of the person or people from whom the truth is being withheld. Fifth, the assessment of another's needs is an act of responsibility which is so complex that it can only be executed wisely when one operates with genuine love for the other. Sixth, the primary factor in the assessment of another's needs is the assessment of that person's capacity to utilize the truth for his or her own spiritual growth. Finally, in assessing the capacity of another to utilize the truth for personal spiritual growth, it should be borne in mind that our tendency is generally to underestimate rather than overestimate this capacity. (62- 61)

To tell the truth, sometimes a student's spiritual growth is not my concern; I am interested only in a change in behavior: "Your feelings about the attendance policy are really not relevant. Unfortunately, your absences are."

Because some students are not capable of using a truth I might tell for their own spiritual growth, sometimes I refrain from telling them what I believe to be true. To tell that truth might mean using it as a weapon—never a good idea. For instance, a student comes to my office ostensibly complaining of a teacher's incompetence, meanness, or unfair grading practices, but sends a signal that the underlying issue is the student's own racism, homophobia, misogyny, religious intolerance, or aggressive ignorance of another culture. In such cases, I often find it difficult to "operate... with genuine love for the other" (Peck 63). But because these underlying issues remain unarticulated, I am not obliged to take them on directly. Even if I were inclined to, the result would likely be stubborn, angry resistance. College threatens first-year students' identities—all these new people, all these ideas, all this strange reading, all these different assignments, all these strange teachers. When people feel threatened, they are often incapable of learning or rational thought, a general rule that applies especially to first-year students. If I said, for example, "The real reason you don't like this teacher is that you're a racist," or "Might the real problem be that the teacher is Muslim?" the student would at that exact moment cease listening to anything I might say. My hope is such a student will stay in school long enough to feel *less* threatened by difference so that she or he might learn from it. My classroom experience tells me that labeling students is less effective than giving facts and information—and time.

Focusing on the obvious issue rather than on the subtext may not change the student's underlying feelings, but it diffuses the surface emotions: "The point of the assignment is not whether *you* believe in global warming. The point is to analyze the writer's ethos. In other words, your task is to point out the things the writer does to seem believable"; "Yes, you really do want to learn about Buddhism. You came here to become an educated person, right? Living in the twenty-first century means we all have know about other religions. What other things have you been reading in this class?" Interestingly, from time to time a student complains that a woman instructor asks to be called *doctor*; typically, this complaint comes from white students about African American women instructors. My response? "Lots of women college teachers with PhDs ask their students to call them Dr. So-and-so. I do. You know why? Because I worked as hard as any man in this department for that degree, and if the men professors are called *doctor*, then I should be, too." No student has ever had the nerve to dispute this with me. Withholding truth is sometimes necessary when youth and fear combine to render students incapable of learning from it.

Spiritual Struggles

Some problems are more vexed, more complicated. Last year, for example, a young man arrived in my office furious that his teacher had penalized him for turning in an essay late. Angrily, he explained why the ten-point penalty was unfair. Then he repeated the whole story, emphasizing this time the moral failings of the instructor. When I attempted to ask a question, he rehearsed the entire story in a louder voice with even more emphasis

on the teacher's faults. He talked about not having money on his print card and the amount he had already spent on tuition, room, books, and so forth. He talked about his position at his previous school, hinting broadly that someone there had told him that he had a lawsuit.

When he took a breath, I asked whether he had the syllabus for the course with him. He did. It included a policy for late papers, which I pointed out. That was not the point, he said; the point was the teacher did not care about the students. The more he argued his own victimhood and the more he complained about the teacher's indifference toward his difficulties, the louder he became and the closer he moved his chair to mine. No explanation I gave could mollify him. Having heard the same complaints and threats several times, I stood up and told him that I would investigate and get back to him.

In the subsequent talk with the instructor, a young-looking teaching assistant, I realized that the TA had given the student one day's penalty when in fact the paper had been two days late. Why had he given the student less penalty than the policy allowed for? The student had been absent the previous week for a family issue—a death in the family, the TA had surmised—and so, feeling bad for the student, the teacher had cut him a break. The day the teacher had returned the paper with the penalty, after class the student had yelled at the instructor, “getting in his face,” as the saying goes. Was this out of character? In intensity, the instructor said, but the student had been resistant to instruction all semester, arguing the specifications of every assignment, dismissing necessary information.

I was angry. It's one thing to yell at me; it's another to yell at a TA. Well, I would just get that kid back in my office and I would say—and I would invite the teacher, too—and I would tell him—and I would explain—and I would—and I would.... I realized I needed to calm down.

Over the next few days, I thought about the death in the student's family and how young people, with little experience with grief, often don't allow themselves expressions of sadness. I have lived long enough to know that grief will show itself one way or the other, and anger is one of those ways. I considered the student's talk about his status at his other school, a community college in a small town in south Georgia, a place where extended families see each other daily, unlike the scattered families of many of our suburban students. A student from a community college might well see Kennesaw with its 25,000 students as huge and impersonal.

Then I remembered being far away from home and being mad at the new place, not realizing that I was grieving the loss of home and status. I remembered how it feels to start over, having to prove yourself again. I know what it's like when people don't understand your sacrifice. And, God knows, I understand being afraid about money. These memories didn't come all at once.

Once I got past the need to tell the student off, once I no longer needed to exhibit my political power over him, once I found compassion for him by identifying with him, I realized that this young man nonetheless needed to hear a description of his behavior. I composed and revised (and revised again, and again) an email informing the student that because of the clarity of the teacher's policy on late papers, the grade would stand. I pointed out that he could appeal my decision and told him how to do so. I wrote that

his teacher had in fact already shown him compassion by giving only one day's penalty instead of the two that the teacher could have given.

Next I said that as a writing teacher, I was much more concerned with the fifteen points he had lost on that particular essay by not attending to the requirements of the assignment. I gave him two specific suggestions for how to read assignments. Then I wrote that as an administrator I was troubled by his behavior in my office, specifically the shouting, the threats, but also the repetitions, the distortion of facts about the teacher's practices, his failure to accept any responsibility. A ten-point penalty did not merit such a response, I said, and suggested that perhaps the reason for his anger lay not in the late penalty, but rather in the family issue that his teacher had mentioned to me. I wrote that the fees he had already paid allowed him to talk his anger with a counselor. Then I sympathized about the price of college.

I did not know whether the student would hear me, but I did know that when I composed and revised the email, I was "operat[ing] with genuine love for the other" (Peck 63). Love, as Peck defines it, is "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth" (81), and I had extended myself by taking a great deal of time working through my own emotions and wording the email as carefully as I could. I wasn't sure that this student had the capacity to "utilize the truth for his . . . own spiritual growth" (63), but experience tells me that Peck's seventh guideline for telling the truth is reliable: we mostly tend to underestimate the capacity of people to use a truth to grow emotionally and spiritually.

How a reader will interpret anything you write is beyond your control, despite your best rhetorical skills. Precisely how this young man took my email, I will never know. I do know from his teacher that his classroom behavior changed. The student's challenges to the teacher's authority, instruction, and assignments ceased. He became, the TA told me, "a model student."

Avoiding and Finding the Truth

Not all my stories have happy endings. Sometimes the spiritual struggle continues. As I have indicated, I like to think that I provide support for the teachers who work in our program, and I strive for a collegial working relationship with them. If at all possible, I uphold teachers' decisions. I remember only three times in eight years telling a teacher that if the appeal went to the dean's office, the student's grievance would be upheld. I invite the teachers' opinions and we decide together on new policies—well, except for the fiats that come down from on high. When an instructor violates a university policy or has a lapse in judgment, my usual practice is to explain the policy or the reason for the problem and then say something like, "So don't do this again." That's typically the end of it. Almost always, a clear but gently worded email about the deficiencies of a syllabus means improvement. Nonetheless my administrative position requires written evaluations of the instructors' teaching for annual reviews. Because most of our instructors are such excellent teachers, this is usually a pleasant experience. But once in a while there is resistance. And then I go through the same process as I do with students, though the spiritual and emotional work is more taxing because my relationship with the teachers is more complicated.

Students know from the get-go that I have power. Even when they do not like my answers, they can see that I've listened to and investigated their issues and that my response is supportive of them as human beings. From time to time, a student appeals to the chair or even to the dean's office, but this happens rarely. But with some instructors, my assessment can be more threatening. With part-timers, I can recommend non-renewal and have done so on occasion when repeated messages have been ignored. With full-time faculty, my assessment of their teaching becomes a permanent part of their performance documents, though only the chair and the personnel committee can recommend non-renewal. Complicating the relationship between me and a few teachers are other typical English department issues—specializations, gender, length of service at Kennesaw, long-standing relationships with other senior faculty—which sometimes put a woman with a specialization in rhetoric and composition (not literature) at a disadvantage. Aware of these complications, I strive to word negative messages carefully.

In the last few years two teachers have resisted my evaluations and/or specific requests for changes. I wish I could go into more narrative detail, but because personnel matters are confidential, I cannot. One, a full-time instructor clearly past middle age but with little experience teaching, seems unable to admit any flaw in her teaching or in her relationships with her students. When anything even slightly negative appears in her review documents, she writes long, tortured rebuttals. The first of these was a dozen single-spaced pages, built on a con/pro structure: *Dr. Daniell says this . . . but this is how it really was*. Despite repeated assurances from both the chair and me that our department never expects perfection but does value both pedagogical reflection and corrective plans, we have been met over and over in annual review conferences marked by tears, anger, denial, excuses, blame, defensiveness. Her less than stellar third-year review by the personnel committee, the chair, and the dean resulted, she explained to me, from her writing "style," rather than from any weakness in her narrative.

Another instructor, this one a man, has consistently ignored my requests for changes to his syllabi so that his composition classes would look more like composition classes and less like literature classes. When in annual review or conferences I have mentioned negative comments on his student evaluations, such as returning papers late, his response has been to wink at me, while reminding me that his overall evaluations are very good, thereby dismissing my concern as unimportant.

To deal with the woman instructor, I have called up my own moments of fear of authority figures and those periods when my own ego was so shaky that I had difficulty admitting mistakes. I've remembered times when I believed I had to be perfect, when any criticism was devastating, when mistakes brought guilt or shame. Using these memories to get to empathy, I've also recognized that I've been far luckier than she. Because I began teaching at age 21, I learned a lot of hard lessons early. The greatest of these: In the classroom, it's not about me.

Truthfully, I have not done this kind of work with the other instructor. Instead, reverting to the southern woman model, I have tried to take care of what I have seen as his fragile ego. Only in writing this essay have I realized how remiss I have been and how that has done us both damage. I have not used Peck's guidelines for telling the truth in my dealings with this teacher. I have, rather, withheld the truth—in the interest, I have told myself, of "being professional," which requires women to pretend *not* to notice

patronizing sexist gestures in the workplace. At least in the south, I have found, men get real insulted when you suggest that perhaps their attitude or judgment or behavior might be skewed by traditional gender privilege. In addition, I have judged negatively this man's "capacity to utilize the truth for his...own spiritual growth" (Peck 61). Peck may well be right that I have underestimated this instructor—but, so far, I have observed no evidence for that position.

Both situations require me to look at myself: Am I being too judgmental? Am I taking things too personally? Am I not being patient enough? Have I been too blunt? Why have I repressed this? Not paid attention to that? Why have I been too reluctant to say what I see? I speak clearly with students and other teachers all the time. Why not with these two? Long ago, Al-Anon taught me that before I can move forward, before I can deal honestly with another human being, I must attend to my side of the street, confront my own failings, be honest with myself, tell myself the truth. Writing this essay has helped me realize that with both these instructors I have been trying to keep the peace and to avoid additional unpleasantness. Taking the "more flies with honey" position, I have been trying to get them to like me, something I had not realized until just this moment. Thus in my attempts to be "professional," I have suppressed my own feelings. Now, as I write, I see that I must face myself squarely—must analyze and name my own emotions—before I can tell either of these instructors the truth. Now that I am recognizing—and accepting—who I am in these relationships, the next step will be to accept these two individuals as they are—not as I wish them to be, not as their colleagues are, but as they are. Now that I am telling myself the truth, I see that my responsibility is not to flatter or appease these two instructors, but to tell them the truth in ways that are both clear and kind.

With these intentional spiritual exercises—memory, identification, gratitude, self-examination, acceptance, and (now) prayer—I am learning all over again to tell the truth.



Work Cited

Peck, M. Scott. *The Road Less Traveled*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978.